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Ex-Envoy Tells of Order to Aid Contras

Tambs Describes Talks With North on Opening a 'Southern Front'

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Former U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica Lewis A. Tambs said yesterday that in mid-1985 he was directed by White House aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North—then part of a secret three-man group managing the Reagan administration's policy in support of the contras—to assist the rebels in opening a "southern front" against the Nicaraguan armed forces.

In nearly four hours of testimony before the House and Senate committees investigating the Iran-contra affair, Tambs said he had numerous conversations with the chairman of the government's Restricted Interagency Group (RIG), Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, about progress on a secret airstrip that was being built by "private, patriotic Americans" to support the rebels.

At the time, Congress had banned all direct or indirect military aid to the contras by the U.S. government.

Tambs' testimony set the stage for questioning today or early next week of Abrams, who has frequently clashed with Congress since taking his post in the summer of 1985, and who has consistently denied any knowledge of U.S. government officials' support for the rebels during the 1984-86 cutoff of U.S. military assistance.

Committee members want to question Abrams to learn whether the RIG, which included North, Abrams and a Central Intelligence Agency representative, reported to higher authorities, such as Secretary of State George P. Shultz and the president, or whether it operated alone to provide deniability to higher officials.

Another witness yesterday, former CIA operative Felix Rodriguez, left the committees with a new question about high-level knowledge of the diversion of funds from U.S.-Iran arms sales to the contra effort. Introduced into evidence

were handwritten notes made by Vice President Bush's national security aide, Donald P. Gregg.

The notes of a conversation Gregg had with Rodriguez on Aug. 8, 1986, include the sentence: "A swap of weapons for \$ was arranged to get aid for the contras." Under questioning from Sen. George D. Mitchell (D-Maine), Rodriguez confirmed everything in three pages of Gregg's notes—except the two lines, concerning which he said he could not recall mentioning any such swap and was unaware of any diversion of funds at the time.

The administration has publicly maintained that no high officials were aware of the diversion before Nov. 25 when it was announced at a press conference by Attorney General Edwin Meese III. A spokesman for Bush said that "except for the most egregious factual errors, we are withholding comment" on the hearings until they conclude.

Tambs, in his testimony yesterday, described a pattern of secrecy that included "back-channel" communications to the RIG, through the CIA station chief in Costa Rica, and "hallway" conversations with Abrams, which kept other U.S. ambassadors from hearing about the "southern front."

Abrams' testimony is also expected to be controversial because of conflicts that committee members said exist between what Tambs said in public yesterday and what Abrams had said earlier in a still unreleased private deposition to the committees.

Abrams, in a Feb. 5 appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations committee, was asked by Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.) whether he knew that U.S. officials in Central America were helping to arrange supplies for the contras during the ban on U.S. aid.

"I would have given you a flat 'no,' up until a couple of weeks ago, when the story appeared alleging involvement by one CIA employee in the region," Abrams testified. "Oth-

er than that, I think I can still give you a 'no' based on my knowledge today."

In an appearance before the committee on March 6, Abrams acknowledged that he had frequent discussions with Tambs about the southern front.

He said, "I do not know that I spoke to him about it prior to his going down to Costa Rica . . . but certainly in the course of . . . the year and a half between the time I came on board and when he left we discussed the southern front, I am sure, you know, virtually every time we met."

Abrams said in that testimony that he did not tell Tambs that it was the ambassador's job to develop the southern front.

Tambs testified yesterday that the southern front was intended to consolidate several guerrilla outfits—which were largely inactive in Costa Rica and causing the Costa Rican government great anxiety—into a fighting force that could effectively pressure the Sandinistas in southern Nicaragua.

Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii), chairman of the Senate select committee, disclosed that Abrams has testified that he does not recall discussing the "southern front" assignment with Tambs privately during a September 1985 meeting of U.S. ambassadors in Panama.

But Tambs testified that he discussed the assignment with Abrams in a three- or four-minute conversation in the hallway, during which "it was obvious to me he [Abrams] knew as much about it as I did."

At the same conference of heads of U.S. missions in the region, Tambs said, Abrams participated in a discussion concerning the secret Santa Elena airstrip in Costa Rica, a project that North had initiated through the CIA station chief. This meeting was attended by Abrams and Alan Fiers, the chief of the CIA's Central American task force.

Tambs said Abrams indicated he was familiar with the project, although construction had not yet begun.

Later, Inouye asked Tambs, "Would you be surprised if Abrams testified that he was not aware of the construction of the airstrip before it was started?"

"I would be somewhat surprised, but . . . well, he might have been distracted," said Tambs.

Tambs, described by Rep. Dante B. Fascell (D-Fla.) as a "rock-'em-sock-'em, no-nonsense type of person," kept the committee members off-balance with quips and sarcastic references to the bureaucratic establishment. At one point, he said, the CIA station chief in Costa Rica, who used the pseudonym Tomas Castillo, "almost had cardiac arrest" when Abrams, at a meeting at the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica in late 1985, brought up the secret air base in front of other American officials not cleared for the information.

But Tambs turned serious when Sen. Warren B. Rudman (R-N.H.) and others referred to higher-ups in the bureaucracy who were letting officials in the field take the blame for the contra operation during the congressional ban.

"I do feel field officers are not being backed up by superiors . . . What I find to be disconcerting, to put it mildly, is to see officers who were carrying out what they believed to be orders from their legitimate superiors now, in effect, seeing their careers sacrificed—and I'm referring specifically to" Castillo.

He said he had believed Castillo was reporting back to North and to the CIA task force chief, who, he assumed, was passing the information to the late CIA director, William J. Casey. Tambs said he talked to Casey in July 1986 and made passing references to the southern front and the airstrip. Casey, he said, seemed "familiar" with the activities.

Castillo, who was put on administrative leave last December because of his activities on behalf of the contras, is scheduled to testify in a closed session with the committees this morning.

Tambs, a history professor who came into the Reagan administration five years ago as a consultant to the National Security Council and then became ambassador to Colombia, said the assignment to "go down and open up a southern front" was given to him by North at a private meeting in the summer of 1985.

He said he thought North was acting on behalf of the RIG, which he had learned about from North in an earlier conversation.

Under sharp questioning from several members, Tambs acknowledged that he had never discussed the task assigned to him by North with Shultz or with North's boss, then-national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane. Nor did he ask the State Department's legal adviser for an opinion about the legality of what he was about to do.

In answer to questions put to him by Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes (D-Md.), Tambs said it was his assumption that Shultz knew of his activities in Costa Rica because Abrams told him.

Asked whether he would be "surprised" that the secretary was kept in the dark about the southern front by Abrams, Tambs said, "I would be uncomfortable about that fact."

He also acknowledged that he had not read the "Boland amendment," which at the time he was appointed prohibited all U.S. direct or indirect military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels. "I'm not a lawyer and probably would not have understood it," he said.

On arrival in Costa Rica, he said, he called in his three top assistants, including Castillo, and told him of the instructions. Soon after that, he said, word arrived from North, through Castillo, to arrange for an airstrip that could serve the southern front. This was considered crucial in getting contra fighters to leave Costa Rica and engage the enemy in Nicaragua.

Tambs said he negotiated an agreement with Costa Rican officials, concerned about the Nicaraguan military buildup, permitting refueling stops by planes that had already dropped military cargos to contra elements in Nicaragua. But, according to Tambs, one mishap led to another. Planes unable to locate the rebels landed still full of ammunition and equipment, and several got stuck in the mud, he said.

The airlift consisted of planes described by Tambs as "a bunch of junk." The airlift, he said, was part of the support provided by what North called "private, patriotic Americans." Later he learned that the runway was being built by Udall Corp., a Panamanian company controlled by retired major general Richard V. Secord.

Castillo, after talking to North, reassured him that Udall was a company that would pay its bills.

Udall, according to documents and testimony, was financed with donations and funds diverted from U.S. arms sales to Iran in 1986.

Before Tambs testified, the committee ended its questioning of Rodriguez, who worked for the airlift run by North and Secord. Rodriguez generally shared Tambs' low opinion of the equipment, and again emphasized his belief that Secord was profiteering off the operation.

Rudman introduced a set of bills submitted by one of the private firms associated with the airlift that charged \$450 a day for the services of pilots in March 1986 when, he asserted, the actual pay was \$150 a day. The bills were paid out of funds generated by the U.S.-Iran arms sales.

Rodriguez confirmed earlier reports that a member of the resupply operation known by the code-name Ramon Medina was actually Luis Posada Carriles, a fugitive linked to the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner that killed 73 people.

The Sandinistas last fall had identified Medina as Posada, who had been in Venezuelan jail on charges stemming from the bombing until he escaped in August 1985.

Rodriguez said he considered Posada, a Bay of Pigs veteran and former CIA operative, an "honorable man" who had been denied due process while he waited in a Venezuelan jail for 10 years without a trial. Posada played a key financial role for the resupply operation in El Salvador and received large sums of cash to pay for rent and other expenses, according to internal records.

"I am the only [one] responsible for him to be there, nobody else," Rodriguez testified. "And I don't regret what I did."

Staff writer Joe Pichirallo and researcher Michelle Hall contributed to this report.